

Lent 5
17/3/2013

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalm 126

Philippians. 5:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Remember not the former things. I am about to do a new thing

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This is what Isaiah has the Lord tell the people of Israel: “Remember not the former things.”

It’s such a strange thing to say to people who have been drilled in the worship of an historical God. *The* historical God. The God of history who has travelled through history with them. The God whose history with them is the foundation of their being as a people. I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. Your God. I am the God who brought you out of Egypt. Your God. Indeed, I am the God who brings you out of Egypt. Remembering God is remembering the great things God has done for us. Remembering that is, literally, re-membering, re-constituting here and now. Not like Western remembering, where we take ourselves back to an earlier time to relive it in our imaginations as if we were back there again. The remembering of Isaiah’s audience is a remembering that brings the past event into the present, so that it is the people present, here and now, who travel with God out of Egypt. It is present experience. The God who brought us out of Egypt is always the God who brings us out of Egypt, whatever our Egypt might be. This is the story of every Sabbath evening meal, is it not?

Yet Isaiah has the Lord tell the people of Israel, “Remember *not* the former things.” Perhaps even more strangely, he has the Lord say, in effect, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt” but you need to forget about that. So now we’re remembering in order to forget? No, not exactly. We remember enough to recognise this as the God we have always known and trusted, but then we set that aside so that we do not restrict our expectation of God to only one way of acting. Because if we limit our expectation of God we may well completely miss, or misunderstand, something spectacular, just because it is unexpected.

Let me put it context. As we understand it, this part of the book of the prophet – or school of prophets – known as Isaiah, was written during the period when a very high proportion of Israelites had been captured by the Babylonians and been taken off to Babylon. We’re not quite sure if it is addressed to those despairing in exile, or those few left behind in a destroyed Jerusalem to mourn the loss of both loved ones and a beloved city. Obviously in either situation, it makes sense to hope that God would send a new Moses to lead the people out of Babylon, just like the exodus from Egypt that they had so long celebrated. A new Moses could both rescue the people and re-establish the law that Moses had given.

But there was no sign of that happening. No sign of any possibility it could ever happen. The response of the people made the whinging in the wilderness seem like a minor aberration. This lot decided that the Lord had failed them because he just didn't have what it takes. They accused him of being an unreliable and weak God, an embarrassment in the eyes of the people and a joke in the eyes of the nations. In fact, this part of Isaiah is written as if it were a transcript of the defence proceedings in the trial of God. So in this passage we hear that, as far as God's concerned, the people are missing the point if they think the only option is for a repeat of past miracles. Past miracles, great as they might have been, ultimately belong in the past. A new day, a new situation, a new context calls for a new solution. If they just had the sense to realise that, they would be looking eagerly for that new solution, and see that it was already beginning to show.

Instead, while they're busy wondering why God isn't out there making a way in the Red Sea, and then wiping out the Egyptians with the ensuing tidal wave, then they're just not going to be in the right place at the right time to see that this time the *way* is through the *wilderness* and the *water* is the source of *life*. Something completely new. Not just a last minute rescue with very unpleasant consequences both for the pursuing Egyptians and for the fleeing Israelites. Let's face it. Wilderness may be better than drowning, but it's not exactly the locus of life abundant. No! This new thing invites a positive stepping out into a *new way*. It lays a path where before there was only wandering. The whole situation is transformed by the flowing water. The place of nothingness is brought to life. And the people who travel the way are brought to life. God is found, doing things differently in an alien place. The people join God in that place, drinking in the life-giving freshness of a God who can reach them, embrace them, and guide them, as they are, where they are. God can be, and is, alive and well and acting in a city where scarcely anyone is left. God can be, and is, alive and well and acting in a place we never thought God would go. Wow! If that doesn't move them to praise God, what will? After all, that's basically what it's all about. God shapes and reshapes the people for Godself, so they can declare God's praise.

So, remember not the former things. I am about to do a new thing. Is this the new way to distinguish the God of Israel from other gods? Is our God, after all, the god of the next big thing? Surely God's not so random as that? Surely we have to be able to have some tags to identify this God. Don't we need to know what God expects of us, and what we can expect of God, if we are to be his people in this age of constant change and ever evolving big new things?

Well, not if our New Testament readings are anything to go by. With the Isaiah reading in mind, it is easy to hear the story of Mary anointing Jesus' feet, and Judas's concern about that, as exactly epitomizing the two attitudes that we have already encountered. Judas knows God. He knows the great things God has done in the past. He knows what God expects of us. He's looking for God to do what God has always done – rescue the people and destroy the enemy. As soon as he can find a sea for God to make a way through the Romans will be done with. Meanwhile, give to the poor. It's what God asks us to do. It's how we show the world what God is like. It's how we show whose side we're on. God's into affirmative action for the poor and so should we be. That's how it's always been.

How wonderful that the writer, with a few strokes of the pen, uses the image of thieving to name Judas's self-deception. That's what self-deception does, isn't it. It robs us and others of the riches of our true selves that we could be openly sharing. It is a betrayal of ourselves and others, and when we do it in the name of God, it is a betrayal of God.

But Jesus is not deceived. Jesus already knows God as the one who is about to do a new thing. So he is able to recognise, almost certainly better than she does herself, that it is Mary, with her extravagant, boldly intimate act of reverence, that is the one in a position to see the new thing God is about to do, perceiving it almost before it springs forth. She stands on the threshold of a totally unexpected, unimaginable new thing, like nothing God has ever done before, and looks forward in anticipation of the new look people of God that God is shaping for his praise. What faith it must have taken to look into the unknown wilderness of death and recognise the springs of life there for those who dared follow this new way. Mary, pouring her precious perfume, images for us the all-pervasive abundance of the re-creation that God is about to unleash. Those who have eyes to see, let them see. Those who have noses to sniff, breathe deep. If you think God is letting people down by not rescuing Jesus, you're looking for an old miracle. Been there. Done that. God is about to do a new thing. A new people of God for a new time and place and circumstance.

Sometimes we can be given the impression that this new thing Mary anticipated, and that we anticipate in our Lenten remembering, was God's last new thing. Jesus died, once for all. Job done. Only the mopping up to go. We don't even have to *long* for God's rescue, like the Israelites. We've already been rescued, transformed, set on the way that transcends death, ahead of time. In re-remembering Christ in our celebration of Eucharist, we proclaim that nothing can come between us and God, because of that amazing new miracle for which Mary prepared us.

But, as with the Israelites, so with us. The Israelites remember the Exodus as the key event that established them as the people of God. Yet they limit their expectation of God to that event to their peril. We remember Easter as the key event that established all people as the people of God. Yet we limit our expectation of God to that event to our peril. Yes, we claim those events as foundational, fundamentally formative. They are the events that enable us to know and trust God, and to know ourselves as the people of God. But then we set that remembering aside, so that we do not restrict our expectation of God to only one way of acting. Because if we limit our expectation of God we may well completely miss, or misunderstand, something spectacular, just because it is unexpected.

Most of us are facing a world very different from when we first believed. Our first experience of the God who raised Jesus from the dead found its meaning for us and expression in us in ways that have been disrupted almost out of recognition as we ourselves have grown and changed, and as we find ourselves a minority, strangers in an ever changing land. It is tempting to hope that God will rescue us, fix everything up, make it like it used to be. As if the way it used to be is right for all time. As if we know what we can expect of God and what God expects of us. Like Judas, we hope that if we just keep on being nice it will all turn out all right in the end. But we deceive ourselves. And we rob the world of the riches which God has entrusted to us.

As far as God's concerned, we are missing the point if we think the only option is for a retelling of past miracles. Past miracles, great as they might have been, ultimately belong in the past. A new day, a new situation, a new context calls for a new solution. If we just had the sense to realise that, we would be looking eagerly for that new solution, and see that it was already beginning to show. We would look for God, doing things differently in an alien place. We would join God in that place, drinking in the life-giving freshness of a God who can reach all people, embrace them, and guide them, as they are, where they are. God can be, and is, alive and well and acting in a church where scarcely anyone is left. God can be, and is, alive and well and acting in places we never thought God would go. If that doesn't move us to praise God, what will?
